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NBC's Sharp Shot at Terrorism

By Tom Shales

Tonight's NBC White Paper report, "The Man Who Shot the Pope—A Study in Terrorism," is less a news broadcast than a trotting-by of scenarios ... and a trot-by on little cat's feet at that. The chief scenario that NBC News hints *might possibly be true* is that Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman who seriously wounded Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981, was a hired killer whose employer, whether he knew it or not, was the Kremlin.

This thesis is entirely and sickeningly plausible, but it is never proved conclusively on the broadcast, at 10 on Channel 4. Indeed, "diplomatic

TV Preview

correspondent Marvin Kalb says in his introduction that "a Soviet connection is strongly suggested but cannot be proved." Then he spends the next hour not proving it.

And yet the report is fascinating, in its way, because it brings the vicious realities of world terrorism into a brighter, harsher light. The report doesn't have the raw urgency of, say, Pierre Salinger's ABC News special about the secret negotiations behind the release of the American hostages in Iran (perhaps the mere raggedy-looking a network documentary, the more rivetingly and credibly it plays on the air), but at the very least, it's grimly sobering, especially for what it says about the ruthless expediences of amoral governments.

The assassination of the pope, it is made clear, would have suited the KGB's interest in two ways: It would have silenced the Polish-born pope on the subject of Solidarity and the workers of Poland, and it could have played a role in the U.S.S.R.'s "destabilizing" of Turkey, a U.S. ally. And so—bang.

Occasionally Kalb and producer Anthony Potter must stretch to make their points. The trial in Rome at which Agca was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment was only three days long, Kalb notes—"almost as if somebody wanted to sweep it under the rug." Somebody? Who? The subject is dropped and soon we're getting new lessons in international politics that involve the Turkish mafia and the docile Communist bloc puppetry of Bulgaria.

Kalb and fellow reporter Bill McLaughlin investigate Agca's background. His brother, as surly and unsavory a character as Agca appears to be, says, "It's like the buzzing of a fly to us. We are not afraid of dying." Terrorism runs in the family. Agca was getting terrorist training in 1977 at the age of 19, and McLaughlin stands on the street corner where Agca committed his first murder for profit, the assassination of a Turkish newspaper editor who had angered both the right and the left.

Agca was, McLaughlin says, "a coldblooded killer for hire, a terrorist without ideology." What you wonder is, how many more of them are running around out there right now? This is one hell of a rotten world we're living in.

Not all the summoned witnesses seem particularly relevant. We see interviews with not just one but two hotel clerks who look up Agca's fake name in their ledgers. Footage of Kalb questioning one hotel clerk looks like footage from "60 Minutes"; the producer is saying to us, "Look, Marvin actually went out on his own two feet and interviewed people." It's showmanship, not journalism, and those oh-so-dignified souls at NBC News shouldn't kid themselves.

However, authoritative figures are

represented as well, including a former KGB agent who defected. Cardinal Silvio Oddi tells Kalb that "any 007" could harm the pope, because he must remain an essentially accessible figure. Kalb: "Who do you suspect?" Cardinal: "You are going too far." Kalb tries another avenue of inquiry, and the cardinal is willing to say of the assassin, "He was certainly acting in the name of others."

ABC News has taken considerable pains in the past few days to point out that NBC is not breaking new ground with this report and that ABC News raised the possibility of the assassination attempt having been the result of a conspiracy on "ABC World News Tonight" in December and a week later on "ABC News Nightline." But the Kremlin connection, however tenuously it is made by Kalb and Potter, is a new wrinkle.

If the facts and suppositions about terrorism made in this program are extremely disheartening, the incidental portrait of the pope himself that emerges is just the opposite. His efforts on behalf of the Polish people seem all the more heroic when one realizes he had to have been aware of the dangers.

While there is much to commend about this NBC White Paper (except for the fact that nothing on television should be called a "paper"), there is much to deplore about the network's promotion of the broadcast. The show has been ballyhooed as resembling a political "thriller" and on-air ads employ graphics that show the pope as viewed through the sights of a rifle (he was shot with a 9-mm automatic, as it happens). This is the kind of insensitive bad taste that would make even Roone Arledge cringe.

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A plot made for TV: Who shot the Pope?

BY Bill Carter
Sun TV Critic

NBC has already made news with its documentary on the shooting of Pope John Paul II—but probably not as much news as you'd expect after seeing this provocative news special.

The fact that there have not been screaming headlines all over the country (or stories on the competing networks) about a Soviet plot to assassinate the Pope tend to cast a little doubt on the startling results of this NBC inquiry.

Or maybe it's just that the story is so convoluted and difficult to sort out.

But there can be no doubt about the impact of the special if it is even remotely close to the truth. It is a disturbing, even shocking revelation about the politics of international terrorism.

"The Man Who Shot the Pope—A Study in Terrorism," which is on Channel 2 at 10 tonight, is a journey through the labyrinthine (one is tempted to say "byzantine," since the geography would be appropriate in this case) world of big-league espionage. It traces the past of Mehmet Ali Agca, a young man whose credentials as a professional terrorist seem irrefutable.

NBC profiles Agca's passage from a small Turkish village, to the University of Ankara, to mingling in international political machinations in Istanbul, to full-fledged terrorist

activity, acted out most overtly in the cold-blooded murder of a liberal Turkish newspaperman.

The best documentation that NBC has is in the area of Agca's finances. They are able to show bank records which record a steady stream of payments, though from no discernible source.

NBC seems to have had a lot of help (the CIA's reaction to these revelations is never mentioned, leading to speculation that it may have had a hand in supplying some of the key information) in following Agca's movement across Turkey and Europe after his escape from the prison where he was being held for the murder. That escape was clearly a part of a well-planned conspiracy.

NBC is able to track Agca through Bulgaria, surely the Soviet Union's most tight-stringed puppet, West Germany, Switzerland and finally Italy, where he shot the Pope from the crowd in St. Peter's Square, May 13, 1981.

That Agca was part of some careful plot, and not a wild-eyed religious fanatic as he was first suspected to be, is incontrovertible. His background is clearly established as riddled with terrorist contacts; NBC names a host of possible co-conspirators, and the financial records and Agca's ability to travel undetected through Europe all point to a man with a lot of contacts.

The main questions are: Who was Agca really working for? And what was his motive?

NBC is less successful in its conclusions in these areas. Marvin Kalb, who is the front man for the report (Bill McLaughlin did much of the legwork) says at the outset that matters of international espionage of this sort of complexity are usually impossible to prove. So from the start you know NBC will not prove its case against the Russians. But the evidence NBC does present surely can be labeled intriguing.

Perhaps most volatile is the existence of a letter, which is stated as a matter of fact tonight by Kalb (attributed to the Vatican "envoy" who hand-

delivered it, who refuses to be named) from Pope John Paul to Leonid Brezhnev himself. The letter, said to be hand-written, reportedly had the Pope promising that he would step down from the papacy and stand "shoulder to shoulder" with his countrymen in Poland if the USSR should invade.

The letter arrived at the height of the Solidarity revolution and, according to NBC, caused the Russians to hyperventilate. Fearing the implications, the Russians backed off from invasion—and instead pushed the internal crackdown in Poland.

Clearly the Pope can be identified as a thorn to the Soviets. But whether that would inspire plots on his life is left to conjecture, reasonable though that may be.

Certainly there is room for Soviet involvement in the endlessly suspicious movements of Mehmet Ali Agca. His presence in Bulgaria alone makes such an inference easy. But NBC's attempts to link the KGB with the so-called "Turkish mafia" and an obscure right-wing Turkish terrorist group called the Grey Wolves are dense, at best.

They also raise certain questions, such as: Why would a group of right-wing fanatics make deals with the KGB, or vice versa? The answer would be mutual interest, but that is not well-detailed tonight.

Blame that on the multi-layered nature of this sort of plot. As Kalb points out, if the Russians were involved, they could be expected to cover themselves well, with layers of groups and interests between them and their professional assassin.

As Kalb says, it is probable that even Agca didn't know for whom he was really working.

As a documentary, "The Man Who Shot the Pope" is gripping and dramatic, though the drama is laid on much too thick in some spots, especially by McLaughlin. Throughout, the prose is extremely strong, maybe stronger than the available documentation can justify.

That may be one reason for the story to have been less than aggressively received by other major news organizations. (They also have doubts about that papal letter.)